



After a Hurricane: Key Facts About Infectious Disease

Although infectious diseases are a frightening prospect, widespread outbreaks of infectious disease after hurricanes are not common in the United States. Rare and deadly exotic diseases, such as cholera or typhoid, do not suddenly break out after hurricanes and floods in areas where such diseases do not naturally occur.

Common gastrointestinal (stomach) and respiratory (breathing) ailments are more likely after natural disasters because clean drinking water may be hard to find and maintaining basic hygiene becomes more difficult. Some common misconceptions exist about disease outbreaks after a hurricane. The following key facts provide clarification:

- **Decaying bodies create very little risk for major disease outbreaks.**
- **Outbreaks of infectious diseases following hurricanes are rare** in developed countries (such as the United States) and only slightly more common in the developing world.
- Numbers of short-term, self-limiting gastrointestinal illnesses and respiratory infections sometimes increase in developed countries. However, numbers of communicable diseases (including gastrointestinal and respiratory illnesses as well as cholera and typhoid) more typically **do not increase** in either developed or developing countries.
- Unless a disease is brought into a disaster area from elsewhere, any outbreaks that occur are almost always from diseases that were already in the disaster-affected area before the disaster struck.
- **Because cholera and typhoid are not commonly found in the U.S. Gulf States area, it is very unlikely that they would occur after Hurricane Katrina.**
- Communicable disease outbreaks can occur when sanitation and hygiene are compromised as a result of a disaster. However, no disease outbreaks have been reported to date in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina.
- As has been the case in past hurricanes, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services quickly sets up tracking systems that monitor illnesses in hurricane-affected areas. In the unlikely event that a disease outbreak occurs, these systems provide an early warning that enables prompt public health response.

For more information on how to protect yourself from disease after a hurricane, see CDC's guidance, [Key Facts About Hurricane Recovery: Protect Your Health and Safety After a Hurricane](http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/recovery.asp) (<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/recovery.asp>).